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3. Structure

Acknowledgment

Preliminary Linguistic Remarks

1 Introduction

1.1 Context Lebanon

1.2 Contemporary Spiritual Practices and Practitioners in Beirut

1.3 Designing Female Life Worlds through Contemporary Spiritual Practices

1.4 State of the Art

1.5 Structure of the Book

2 Theoretical Approach

2.1 Contemporary Spiritual Practices

2.2 Agency revisited: the Concept of Designing

3 Methods

3.1 Data Collection and Data Analyses

3.2 Research-related Challenges and Positionality

4 Historical Context and Contemporary Life Worlds of Beirut's Middle Class

Denise's Story

4.1 Lebanon – A Short Historical Introduction

4.2 Between Political and Economic Crisis – Living in Beirut

4.3 Social Relations

4.4 Religion – Between Faith and Repulsion

4.5 Seeking – Educated Urban Middle-Class Women

5 Designing the Self in Community

Amira's Puzzle

5.1 Self in Focus

5.2 Community in Focus

5.3 Designing the Self in Community

5.4 Preliminary Findings: Agency in the Social Sphere

6 Designing Individual Religiosities

Yvettes' Doubts

6.1 Islam and Christianity in Spiritual Centres and Courses

6.2	Spiritual Practices and individual Perspectives on Islam and Christianity
6.3	Designing Individual Religiosities
6.4	Preliminary Findings: Agency in the Religious Sphere
7	Designing Female Life Worlds
7.1	“I’m the creator of my life”
7.2	Rebellious Mediation
7.3	Societal Implication of a Leisure Practices
7.4	Contemporary Spiritual Practices as a Gender- and Class-specific Heterotopia
8	Conclusion
8.1	Seeking and Designing
8.2	The Transformation of Religiosities and Gender-specific Constructions of the Self in the Framework of a Leisure Practice
9	Literature

4. Summary

Contemporary spiritual practices, such as various forms of meditation and yoga, spiritual teachings as well as alternative energy-based healing methods, became increasingly popular in Lebanon's capital Beirut. In particular, well-educated women from the urban middle class participate in public courses and private circles. In this thesis, I ask how contemporary spiritual practices were meaningful to women of Beirut's educated urban middle class.

My analysis is based on empirical data, specifically narrative interviews and participant observations, that was gathered during ten months of ethnographic research in Lebanon between March 2017 and December 2018. By applying the concept of designing (*gestalten*) – an amalgamation of agency theory (Ortner 1999, 2006), discourse theory and the concept of heterotopia (Foucault 1991, 1992, 1995, 2014) - I analyse form and content of contemporary spiritual practices as well as women’s narratives of their individual experience of these practices.

I show that the women at the center of this study were seeking meaningful answers in two areas of their life: social relations and religion. On the one hand, they were searching for new interpretations of established social positionings that would meet both their individual life goals and the expectations of their social environment. On the other hand, women were searching for individual forms to express their Muslim and Christian faith - forms which took into account women's connection to Islam or Christianity as well as their critical stance to established forms and interpretations of Islam and Christianity in Lebanon. I hypothesize that in the context of spiritual practices, my interlocutors cultivated new understandings of themselves and their

position in community, as well as alternative perspectives on Islam and Christianity. I call these reinterpretations of socio-cultural constructions of meaning about religion and the self in community processes of designing (*Gestaltungsprozesse*).

I show that in the spiritual classes, women shaped and experienced a new concept of self through physical, sensual and discursive practices. This "individual self" was understood as a separate, self-constituting entity that pursues individual goals. Furthermore, I show that women designed and experienced new approaches to Islam and Christianity in the course of spiritual practices. In the light of spiritual teachings, women reinterpreted religious scriptures and practices and developed new explanations for religious commandments. These new spiritual inspired approaches to religion resulted in women's individual Muslim or Christian religiosities, in which the sensual experience of the individual believer was the central guideline for religious decisions.

However, these processes of designing the self in community and designing individual religiosities were not fundamentally opposed to established norms. Spiritual practices offered women new perspectives on their self as well as ways of interpreting religious practices that were new, but nevertheless connected to the established social order. For example, the value and importance of established social positionings such as wife and mother were emphasized, but according to my interlocutors, everyone should decide for herself on the ways these social positionings were shaped. Similarly, the value and importance of Muslim and Christian religion was undisputed, but the perspective of religious authorities and institutions became one voice among many on which women based the development of their individual religiosity. Thus, spiritual practices helped the women to create a harmonious balance between the self as an individual and the self as part of a community, as well as a harmonious balance between a woman's individual faith and the established Muslim or Christian religion to which she felt connected.

I therefore conclude that the processes of designing (*Gestaltungsprozesse*) that took place in the framework of spiritual practices condensed into a class- and gender-specific heterotopia. This heterotopia offered a space for the women's search for meaningful answer. It provided tangible and subjectively "effective" (Foucault 1992: 39) answers to women's aspirations to realize their desired life world without fundamentally questioning the existing social order. By designing the self and designing individual Muslim or Christian religiosity, my female interlocutors experienced expanded opportunities to change social and religious matters according to their ideas. Thus, contemporary spiritual practices have an empowering effect on the participating women and their aspirations to individually shape their life.